

# Lithuania

Melanie Henke interviewed **Irena Veisaitė**.

Interview date: August 2019

**Henke:** My name is Melanie and I am here today with Irena Veisaitė. Before presenting my interviewee, I would like to say a few words about myself. I am 26 years-old and I come from Hamburg, Germany. Since my mum is Lithuanian and my dad is German, I grew up speaking both Lithuanian and German. I studied cultural science and art history in Germany, Austria, Denmark, and Hong Kong, and right now I work as a German teacher in Lyon, France.

A few months ago, I found out about the European Archive of Voices project. In my search for a person to interview, I asked my friends here in Lithuania and a few of them mentioned Irena Veisaitė.

Thus, dear Irena Veisaitė, please correct me or add to what I am saying - you were born in a Jewish family in Kaunas on 9 January 1928. This means that you are a witness to five historical periods: the interwar period, the Soviet and Nazi occupation, the Soviet era, the restoration of Lithuanian independence, the process of European unification and the establishment of the European Union.

You are a well-known cultural and public figure in Lithuania, a scholar, literary scientist, and theatre critic. And you were a member or chairperson of some international NGOs. You are the recipient of numerous awards.

**Henke:** We met in your apartment close to the centre of Vilnius. First of all, I would like to talk to you about home - what does home mean to you? Where is your home?

**Veisaitė:** My home is in Lithuania. Home is always the place where you feel safe. Where you find it comfortable and nice to live. If you ask me about homeland, my homeland is Lithuania. You cannot choose your homeland, just like you do not choose your parents or the time when you are born. I was born in Kaunas but I have lived in Vilnius since 1943, when I was rescued by Lithuanian friends who saved me from the Holocaust.

**Henke:** What associations do you have with the place you grew up in? What does Kaunas mean to you?

**Veisaitė:** Nazi occupation, we were all deported to the ghetto. My Mother and my uncle were already killed in the first days of the war. My grandmother died in the ghetto and my grandfather was killed during the Children and Old People's Action in the beginning

of 1944<sup>1</sup>. I was saved, but very few Jews survived in Lithuania, so for me, in a sense, Kaunas is a city of shadows. When the war ended it would have been difficult for me to go back to Kaunas. When I escaped from the ghetto on the 7 November 1943, my friends immediately took me to Vilnius, because they were afraid somebody might recognize me in Kaunas. I looked like a Jewish girl. Vilnius was more of a multi-ethnic city. So, as of 8 November, 1943, I was living in Vilnius. But clearly, Kaunas is in my blood. I know the city, I love it. I would like Kaunas to prosper. I am very happy that it was elected to be the Capital of Culture in 2022. But I haven't lived in Kaunas since after the war.

**Henke:** You mentioned that you were afraid to go back to Kaunas during your childhood. When and how did that feeling change?

**Veisaitė:** I felt very safe with my parents, who unfortunately got divorced in 1938, which was a big blow to me. The safety I felt in my family, at school and on the street – everywhere - that feeling of peace was sometimes disturbed because I would sometimes hear my parents talk about the impending war, or the fact that Hitler had come to power, or the anti-Semitic politics there [in Germany], and I also heard about the 'Kristallnacht'<sup>2</sup>. And of course, I was very afraid of war and I would sometimes even dream about it. I remember one dream in which I was taken to Hitler's camp, where there was a military man surrounded by tents and he told me I had to go to Hitler's tent. And then I had to sit down on his lap and call him 'Papi' ('Daddy'), but I couldn't say the word, and then I woke up, and was very happy that I didn't call him 'Papi'. You see that threat of war, that shadow was already there. And the first blow was no doubt the Soviet occupation in 1940, when we were driven out of our apartment. At that time, we were forced to leave our house and had to move into a communal apartment; our entire lifestyle had changed. But that was something I did not think of as tragic at the time. When I say 'not tragic', I mean that although we were already under the Soviet occupation, we did not feel excluded for being Jews. I did not yet sense a threatening atmosphere; we were in the same position as everybody else under the Soviet occupation and experienced the same threat as everybody when the June 1941 deportations started. I attended school and life carried on as normal. Only when the Nazis came our lives changed overnight.

**Henke:** Did you talk about the war with your parents and grandparents?

**Veisaitė:** I did not talk about it – I would mostly listen to them talk. And not so much with my grandparents as with my parents' guests.

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<sup>1</sup> In spring 1944, the Germans raided Kovno ghetto in search of old people and children, they assumed had not been found yet by previous raids. They were sent to the Ninth Fort, used by the Nazis as a place of execution for Jews, captured Soviets, and others.

<sup>2</sup> Pogrom against Jews carried out by SA paramilitary forces and civilians throughout Nazi Germany on 9–10 November 1938.

**Henke:** What was your childhood dream for your future? What did you think your life was going to be like?

**Veisaitė:** At first, I really wanted to be a singer but I was not very musical. Afterwards, I wanted to be an actress and worked hard to get the lead roles at school. And I even told my parents that if I did not become an actress, I would kill myself. These were my childhood ambitions – which could certainly not be fulfilled. But I was always very good at learning. I wanted to learn, I was very curious, I read quite a lot and was always the top student in my class.

**Henke:** Is there an object or an item from your childhood that you have had all your life?

**Veisaitė:** No, everything was taken away. I don't have anything anymore. Afterwards, they gave me back a couple of photographs. But I had nothing. I walked out dirt-poor. Later, our maid returned a silver vase that belonged to my mother, but in reality, I have nothing.

**Henke:** As a child, how did you see Europe and foreign countries? Did you know about other countries?

**Veisaitė:** Yes, I knew about them very well. I have spoken three languages since childhood, my mother tongue Lithuanian, and Russian. Then at the age of four or five, because my lungs were damaged, I was sent to stay in a sanatorium in Arosa, German Switzerland, where I lived without my parents, and where I learned German. I forgot all the other languages and only spoke German at that time. I remember once when my uncle in Moscow gave me a Singer sewing machine for children as a special present, and the sewing machine was called швейная машина [shveynaya mashina] in Russian. I started crying and said, '*Ich will keine Schweinemaschine*' ('I don't want a pig machine!'). That shows how much Russian I forgot. And later, of course, these languages come back to you. Then my parents sent me to a Yiddish gymnasium, which was pretty leftist – Šolom Aleichem School. They had very good teachers, which is why my father sent me there. All my male and female cousins were in Lithuanian schools and I was at the Yiddish gymnasium, where I learned Yiddish.

**Henke:** In which language do you feel most at home?

**Veisaitė:** Lithuanian.

**Henke:** Is Europe also your home?

**Veisaitė:** Certainly. If you ask me briefly what my identities are, I am a Jew, as long as there is at least one anti-Semite alive, I am Lithuanian because I'm from Lithuania and I follow Lithuanian culture, and I am European, undoubtedly.

**Henke:** Did you ever feel foreign?

**Veisaitė:** I have had moments. There was a Nazi period when we were completely without rights, we were ostracised and we were threatened with death every day. It is

well known what the Nazi occupation meant to the Jewish people. There is no need for me to explain it. The second Soviet occupation started in summer 1944. My second mother, Ms Ladigienė, was deported to a Gulag in 1946. The NKVD [People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the interior ministry of the Soviet Union] tried to recruit me as their informant but I refused; they were persecuting me and I was advised by friends that it would be better for me to leave Vilnius. My father was abroad, he survived the Holocaust in Belgium as a Lithuanian citizen, since foreign passports did not indicate nationality or religion. Nobody turned him in and he survived. The fact that my father was abroad was a great sin in the eyes of the Soviets. They did not trust anybody who maintained contact with people abroad. They even persecuted their own soldiers who were prisoners of war during the Second World War.

I was admitted to Vilnius University [Lithuanian Language and Literature] and after one year of successful studies I was warned by a friend that I could be expelled from the University because of my father living abroad and my second mother's arrest. In 1948 I left for Moscow where my father's relatives lived, and eventually was admitted to complete German studies at Lomonosov University, from which I graduated in 1953.

**Henke:** What was the most important thing you learned at school?

**Veisaitė:** Everything was important. I was mostly interested in social sciences and humanities but I was also good at maths. I had many good teachers. My family and school taught me to be an honest person, to be tolerant and always seek the truth. Maybe the school gave me a sense of social engagement, encouraged social involvement. I felt that this was a very leftist, pro-Soviet school, a position which I afterwards rejected.

**Henke:** What did your day-to-day life at school look like?

**Veisaitė:** I left in the morning for classes. My parents, especially my father, taught me to be independent. I was taken there a few times, and then I had to go by myself although the school was way on the other side of town. I also had to come back from school by myself, so I became independent. At first, my lessons would end earlier, and afterwards later in the day. I completed six years of education before the war. At home we needed to do some homework, but we would also play and go to the cinema. My parents would sometimes take me to the theatre. Sometimes I would go on my own. When I went with them, we sat in better seats but on my own, I would sit in the 'Galiorka' (up in the gods) so as not to stand out from the other students from my school, some of whom had poor parents. My parents were well-off.

**Henke:** What is your best memory from your school? What was your most memorable day?

**Veisaitė:** I remember many days like that. For example, I remember very well that I so much wanted to have a little brother or sister. Since I didn't have one, I told all my friends as a secret that I had a baby brother. And then – I won't tell you all the details

–this lie got exposed. It was during a school celebration to which my mother came – and everyone congratulated her [on the baby boy]. But my mum did not scold me. My mother probably understood that I wanted to have a little brother or sister very much and that is why I lied. When other kids came to visit me at my home, to congratulate me, I would put a teddy bear on my parents' bed and show it to them from afar. I also remember very well the day this got exposed.

I also remember one particular geography lesson. We had a teacher called Itikson. She was a great geography teacher, and one day she took us to a river bank at Kačerginė. And she said we had to imagine that we were in the Sahara and had to find an oasis and water. This was a very interesting lesson. We also had an amazing Lithuanian language teacher, Berevoic Brik was her last name.

**Henke:** What was your favourite book when you were a child?

**Veisaitė:** I had many favourite books. First of all, I really enjoyed *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Biliūnas's short stories '*Kliudžiau*' ('I hit') and '*Brisiaus galas*' ('Brisius's end'). Then I really liked Robinson Crusoe because you had to demonstrate a great deal of ingenuity to stay alive when you find yourself on an uninhabited island. I was very curious about this. Then I read a lot of German girly literature. I remember there was a series called '*Nesthäkchen und ihre Puppen*' ('*Nesthäkchen and her dolls*'). I read those books avidly. It is of course, sentimental blarney, but at that time I read it a lot and liked it.

**Henke:** Was it your choice what to study at university? And how did you choose?

**Veisaitė:** It was exclusively my choice. I've always been independent and made my own decisions. People tried to talk me into studying medicine, but I went elsewhere. I had a great teacher during my last grades, her name was Zaborskaitė. She later became a well-known professor in Lithuania. She instilled in me a love for literature and I went on to complete Lithuanian studies. As I told you, I had to leave later, but I still stayed with the humanities. I went on to do German studies.

**Henke:** How did you finance your studies?

**Veisaitė:** In the Soviet Union education was free for everybody. I only had to pass the entrance exams.

**Henke:** Was there a lecture at the university that changed your life?

**Veisaitė:** There were a lot of good lectures, but I do not recall one that changed my life.

**Henke:** As a student, did you ever question what you were being taught?

**Veisaitė:** Yes, I would argue with the teachers. During the Soviet years, for example, they taught us a great deal about Marxism, Leninism, dialectical materialism and historical materialism. I only had to pass the exam for all my knowledge to evaporate.

There was so much ideology and it was not acceptable to me at all. It was probably through this that my worldview was formed: I will never accept the concept of a dictatorship of the proletariat, the idea that violence is allowed in the name of a proletarian dictatorship.

**Henke:** Were there moments when you were afraid of something at school or university?

**Veisaité:** Of course, I was afraid. Talking about school, I was going to a forbidden school in the ghetto, and it made a big difference to me that we read Schiller's ballads. It made me realize for the rest of my life that there was no need to equate the German culture with the Nazis — that the Nazis had nothing to do with German culture, that the nationality can never be blamed for anything. We read Schiller's ballads, which talk about friendship, loyalty, love – and he was German, which made a huge difference to me. In those days, I had already understood. When I studied German culture after the war, I would tell people that German studies have nothing to do with the Nazis. Germany has a very significant humanist tradition.

**Henke:** Was there a moment when your education turned out to be extremely useful?

**Veisaité:** Yes, there were certainly such moments. The fact that I knew languages was very important. As early as in 1968, since I had the opportunity to visit my father in the United States, I very purposefully learned English there. And the fact that I was proficient in English later allowed me to become more actively involved in the new battle for independence and nation-building.

**Henke:** What language did you speak at school?

**Veisaité:** We spoke Yiddish at school. Not at home. I only spoke Yiddish to my grandparents when I learned it.

**Henke:** What does the Yiddish language mean to you?

**Veisaité:** It is just like any other language. But I do not use it anymore, unfortunately. I do not have anyone to talk to and my life has gone in a different direction, but to this day I understand Yiddish. I can read and write the language, but it is all very slow. I could not tell you in Yiddish what I'm telling you right now.

**Henke:** What sources of knowledge other than school and university have been important in your life? Where did you get your knowledge from? Who did you learn the most from?

**Veisaité:** From life, from people, from friends, from those who saved me, from everywhere - like everyone. And I read a lot.

**Henke:** What is the main lesson or what main values did you learn from your parents?

**Veisaité:** Tolerance, respect, understanding. I am very grateful to my parents for that.

**Henke:** What did your parents do? What kind of education did they have?

**Veisaitė:** My father worked at the chief agency for the Lithuanian Lottery. They sold lottery tickets. And my mother was unemployed. She graduated with an economics degree at Handelshochschule Berlin. My dad, by the way, graduated from a *Gymnasium* or was about to graduate when World War I broke out in Hamburg. They both spoke German well. But my mother only started working during the Soviet era when she was divorced from my father. She had to work and she was glad to be working. But before that, she did not work.

**Henke:** What message or values did you pass on to your child or children?

**Veisaitė:** I wanted them to be good people.

**Henke:** How did you get your first job and what was it?

**Veisaitė:** My first job was when I got out of the ghetto. I worked as a cleaner, a washer. It was in a simple sanatorium, in a Kindergarten, an orphanage, on Subačius street. This was my first job. I lived there with a different last name and I had a Lithuanian passport. So I kept alive and after that I graduated from a university in Moscow and I was invited to teach European and German literature at the Pedagogical Institute. I chose to teach old Western European literature. That is, medieval renaissance, 17th and 18th centuries. I did this because it would involve less Soviet ideology, fewer lies. Because I never wanted to adjust to that. I read a lot of German literature and history and worked there for 43 years. And then when independence came, I became the chairperson of the Open Lithuania Foundation. Then I became an ombudsman at the Open Society Institute, and then I retired. But I still work. I wrote a book with Aurimas Švedas, thanks to him.

**Henke:** Which of your jobs are you most proud of?

**Veisaitė:** I am not proud at all. I am only grateful to my fate that it allowed me to live the way I did. I loved my students so much and I am really, really happy that I was able to communicate with them, with young people, and I wanted to make them feel that not all the questions in life had answers. I wanted to give them an idea that they heard a lot of lies and to give them a lesson in tolerance. And then, at the Open Lithuania Foundation, we helped with and contributed to the creation of an independent Lithuania, and since the 1990s, to the establishment of a democratic society.

**Henke:** Were there moments when your work was undervalued? How did you react?

**Veisaitė:** Oh yes, very much so, in Soviet times. I did not react in any way. There was terrible anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. You always had to indicate your nationality everywhere, it was the so-called fifth point [on internal passports of the Soviet Union the fifth point covered whether an individual was Russian, Ukrainian, or Jewish, etc. and seen as an open invitation for harassment of Jews], and it placed a lot of

restrictions on you. Obviously, not as much as during the Nazi period, but it was limiting anyway. You could not get certain jobs. For example, I taught German literature because I had links with the German Democratic Republic, but they never even let me visit the German Democratic Republic. I remember being accused by a student of taking the theatre department down the wrong path. From 1964, I worked extensively in the field of theatre and conducted theatre seminars. The student said I was directing them in the wrong way and he actually wanted to get me expelled from the university. I won't tell you the details, but it all ended with my students coming from all over Lithuania to defend me. They did it so well that I left that meeting as if leaving an anniversary party. This was one of my happiest moments and a moment of gratitude to my students who never betrayed me and understood everything I told them.

**Henke:** Would you choose the same profession over again if you were 20?

**Veisaitė:** Probably, yes.

**Henke:** How has your work affected your family?

**Veisaitė:** When I got married and my daughter was born, I was still working, and my daughter told me that I was never spending quite enough time with her even though I always did everything and really loved and still love her. I could pluck a star from the sky for her. But apparently, she did not have enough time with me because I was always working, I was always busy and I was never entirely dedicated to my family, even though family is very important to me.

**Henke:** What advice would you give to the younger generation working in your profession?

**Veisaitė:** Read a lot, be interested in everything, have your own values and stay true to yourself, never lie and never betray yourself – your values – because of fear, or for gain. You know, when people talk to their bosses at work nowadays, they tell them what they want to hear, they are afraid to say what they think. You need to know how to speak and know where and what you are saying, but in no way should you lie. Do not [try to] conform. There are a lot of polemics in Lithuania now on the subject of collaboration. I do not want to accuse or vindicate anyone, but I would like to wish everyone to be themselves.

**Henke:** What does your daughter do?

**Veisaitė:** She is also a philologist. She graduated with a degree in Slavic studies, but in England.

**Henke:** You studied in Moscow. What impact did that have on your work?

**Veisaitė:** This has greatly expanded my horizons. It is not only the capital of communism, not only the capital of Russia, but it is a huge cultural centre with



wonderful people, real intellectuals and an extremely rich culture. So I learned a lot there and my horizons widened greatly.

**Henke:** I would like to talk briefly about political perceptions. We have already talked about how you heard your parents talk about the war. What other topics were *discussed* at the family table? Which politician names did you hear during your childhood?

**Veisaitė:** Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini. Masaryk was a perfect president, I remember. He was greatly respected. I don't know, I was not so interested in politicians back then.

**Henke:** Was there any politician you admired?

**Veisaitė:** We all loved [Antanas] Smetona [who became Lithuania's first president in 1919]<sup>3</sup>, we called him Smetonėlė Grietinėlė. We were brought up with a spirit of patriotism in that Yiddish school, because it was a Yiddish school and Yiddish schools, unlike Zionist ones, encourage people to live their life in the country of their birth. I was very patriotic. I remember how we sang 'We won't calm down without Vilnius'. But I hated Hitler. Well, and Franco, Mussolini, the Spanish Civil War - I heard a lot about them. I only read Hemingway later, of course. Because I was only thirteen when the war started.

**Henke:** What was your first encounter with politics? Could you protest, were you part of a youth movement?

**Veisaitė:** I was a Pioneer [the Young Pioneers were a mass youth organisation of the Soviet Union for children of age 9–15]. And then, during the Nazi occupation, I was nothing. I was only trying to stay alive. There was constant fear, hunger – a desire to learn. My second mother was Stefanija Ladigienė [To avoid notice while in hiding, Irena was moved by her Lithuanian friends from home to home, eventually ending up in the home of Stefanija Paliulytė Ladigienė, where she lived until the end of the Nazi occupation<sup>4</sup>]. She was arrested and taken to the Gulag, which was terrible. My first love, Tadas Masiulis, was arrested as well, and I no longer had any illusions at that time. I had very strong anti-Soviet sentiments, humanist sentiments.

**Henke:** Do you have memories of trips where you cross European borders?

**Veisaitė:** Yes, I do. First of all, when I was five years old, I spent a year in Switzerland, and in 1938 I travelled with my father, since my parents were already divorced, and according to their agreement I could spend the summer with him. He no longer lived in Lithuania. He married in Germany, his second wife Mary, was German, and she lived in Belgium. In 1938 he took me abroad. We were in Berlin with him. He got me to sit

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<sup>3</sup> Antanas Smetona (1874 - 1944), in 1919 became the first president of Lithuania and later returned to power as an authoritarian head of state for the last 13 years of his country's independence.

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://vilniusreview.com/articles/456-in-memoriam-irena-veisaitė-january-9-1928-december-11-2020>

on a yellow bench on Unter den Linden, so that I would learn what it meant to be separated and isolated from society [Jews were only allowed to sit on a few scattered benches painted yellow in public parks]. He told me that, as Lithuanian citizens, we did not have to sit there, but he wanted me to learn what it was like. We were also together in Belgium, Switzerland, and France, so I got to see Europe back then. [Note by the editor: In 1940, the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania, and Irena lost contact with her father. Her father survived the War in Belgium and emigrated to the United States. She only met him again in 1968<sup>5</sup>]

**Henke:** When did you first vote?

**Veisaitė:** I voted for the first time during the Soviet years when I had to vote, but this left no impression on me. I remember that one could buy something in the vicinity of the polling station what was not usually available in shops or something which was in short supply. Other than that, I do not remember anything; it was a formality. And you went to vote knowing that it was just an illusion and only for show. I knew that very well.

**Henke:** And today - would you describe yourself as a political person? If so, what makes you a political person?

**Veisaitė:** I would not describe myself as a political person. I am just a cultural person. But I have to be interested in politics because it permeates our entire life and also exerts a great influence on culture.

**Henke:** What topics have you been particularly interested in lately?

**Veisaitė:** I am very interested in everything that's taking place in the world. I am particularly interested in education and theatre issues. Then, of course, I am very interested in the relationship between Jews and Lithuanians. And I have written a lot about it.

**Henke:** Which issue would make you go out on the street and demonstrate? Is there an issue that is particularly important to you?

**Veisaitė:** Yes, there is. I am against any form of nationalism, against any violence. I went to demonstrate, well, not to demonstrate, because there was no demonstration, but I protested when the mayor of Vilnius [Artūras] Zuokas ordered the demolition of houses in the Roma neighbourhood. It was winter.

**Henke:** How would you briefly describe Lithuania's role in world history?

**Veisaitė:** You should ask historians.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://vilniusreview.com/articles/456-in-memoriām-irena-veisaite-january-9-1928-december-11-2020>

**Henke:** Do you trust European institutions and European politics?

**Veisaitė:** I would very much like to. I strongly believe in the idea of Europe, I strongly believe in the European Union, but unfortunately, not everything is going perfectly. There is a great deal of bureaucratic activity. However, I'm not a politician, I'm not a specialist on the subject. But I strongly support the European Union. That is how we should live. We need greater tolerance. After World War I, nationalism may have played a useful role in establishing independent states like Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and many other eastern European countries especially. But this must not overshadow the idea of European unity, the idea of peace, the idea of tolerance. And I am, of course, very, very supportive of the European Union. And I am very worried that we are facing a crisis right now — that populists, nationalists are emerging. The European Union will not take away our nationality. If anyone takes away our nationality, it will be us, if we betray our values, our language, etc.

**Henke:** Do you remember the first foreigner you ever met?

**Veisaitė:** It was the French consul in Lithuania, Monsieur Domenil. I liked him very much. He was so funny and I remember how he always made me laugh and how he placed a knife under his arm and said that he was going to fight the 'Bosh', Bosh meaning the Germans.

**Henke:** Have you had any experiences traveling around Europe during which you became worried or afraid?

**Veisaitė:** I did when I was traveling with my parents. And later, in 1968, when I was going to visit my father [after not having seen him for 30 years while in exile], I was already a responsible person. I was 40 years old. It was a very interesting trip, the event of a lifetime, as they say. I knew Western Europe, I saw what America was, what England was, what France was. It was at the time of the student protest movements. I learned and understood a lot.

**Henke:** Is there a country you have not yet visited but would like to?

**Veisaitė:** There are many countries. I have never been to, Greece, for example.

**Henke:** Can you name songs or movies that might define you or are important to you?

**Veisaitė:** When it comes to songs, I know a lot of songs in Yiddish, German, Lithuanian and Russian, I do not sing in English. I only know one French song – the one about Normandy because I only learned French later. I did not know it as a child. And I learned English even later. I used to like all of these songs of my youth. We used to sing a lot of Spanish songs when I was at university. It was popular to sing songs from various nationalities. As for movies, Italian neo-realism left a huge impression on me. Russian films, too. [Films by Russian film maker Andrei] Tarkovsky left a huge impression. There was also a film by [Georgian film director Tengiz] Abuladze, about

the unmasking of Stalin and that entire period [she refers to the film 'Repentance']. And there are many other films. I like the cinema a lot. I very much admire [Ukrainian] Sergei Loznitsa, who is telling the painful truth about his country. Because, in essence, you can only break free from the past and any other guilt or remorse through the truth.

**Henke:** Is there any work of art or artist that has inspired you and perhaps changed your life?

**Veisaitė:** I have liked Van Gogh ever since childhood. I also like [Lithuanian painter Mikalojus Konstantinas] Čiurlionis very much. There are plenty of artists – Russian artists, and Western ones. I cannot name them all here.

**Henke:** Is Europe a political or cultural project for you?

**Veisaitė:** First of all, cultural. But it's also political.

**Henke:** Some say 'politicians destroy bridges, artists rebuild them'. Do you agree with this saying?

**Veisaitė:** Sometimes it's true, yes. Especially right now.

**Henke:** When was the first time you used a computer, phone and TV? And how has your life changed because of them?

**Veisaitė:** There was already a telephone in my parents' house, and there was a radio. There was no TV back then. I do not remember the year, maybe it was 1956 when television was introduced in the Soviet Union. Of course, I also bought a TV set and watched it. I only got a computer late in life, of course. I am not a member of the computer generation but I have used a computer since 1990.

**Henke:** I would like to ask about tradition. Which day do you celebrate the most and how do you celebrate it?

**Veisaitė:** Because I live in Lithuania, we mostly celebrate Christmas and Easter. During my childhood, I also celebrated Easter and Chanukah with my grandparents, but then these celebrations disappeared from my life. We also celebrate the 16<sup>th</sup> February. For me that is the main celebration of Lithuanian independence. But I also celebrate, with the rest of Lithuania, the 11<sup>th</sup> March and King Mindaugas of Lithuania's coronation day.

**Henke:** Let's talk briefly about humour. Do you remember any jokes that were told in your childhood or teenage years?

**Veisaitė:** I remember one very well, but I cannot tell you right now because it's obscene. But it is very witty. I do not like rude jokes but I like this one because, although it is a bit vulgar, it is also very witty. In Soviet times there were many Jewish jokes; Armenian radio jokes were also very popular. Jokes are always interesting. Although I

cannot say that I have a great sense of humour, I really appreciate good jokes and irony as well.

**Henke:** Behind the Iron Curtain, how were you able to discover interesting works of art, music, movies and literature?

**Veisaitė:** Some things I was able to discover, some things I could not. But then I went to the United States in 1968 and saw many cultural things there. And travelling all over Europe really opened my eyes. There were three places in America where I cried. One was at the dentist's, because they used anaesthetics and the drills were much more advanced, so I was feeling sorry when thinking about how painful having dental work done in Soviet Lithuania was. Then at a shoe store, because there was such a choice of wonderful shoes and I felt sorry for myself and my family and friends who suffered from wearing uncomfortable shoes in the Soviet Union. But the main one was at the bookstore. I realized that I had been robbed, that there were so many things I didn't know. I brought back a lot of books.

**Henke:** How do you think your life would have been different if you had seen or heard certain books, movies or music before?

**Veisaitė:** You know, I cannot answer that question. There is a Jewish saying, I think: 'What if grandmother had wheels?' How can I answer such hypothetical questions? I saw and heard a lot during the Soviet years because there were screenings of Italian neo-realism and other films that were not shown to the public. My second husband was a film director. When we were invited to a special closed screening for the privileged few professionals, we would go. Thus, I had some connection to the outside world. I already learned about Kafka in the United States in 1968. I learned about a lot of things in the United States. But not about everything, of course.

**Henke:** Now let's talk about freedom. What does freedom mean to you?

**Veisaitė:** I can quote Don Quixote. When Don Quixote and Sancho Panza leave the house of the Duke and Duchess, they were well received but also mocked, of course. Perhaps they did not understand everything. Then Don Quixote tells Sancho Panza—and perhaps I am misquoting here, but the meaning is roughly the same – that freedom is the greatest gift heaven gave to men, and it is a value one should sacrifice one's life for. Meanwhile, favours, accepted from various powerful people in the world, place you under an obligation. I think this is Chapter 47, Part II. I really like Cervantes; Don Quixote is one of my favourite characters. His words about freedom are very important to me. You must be free, even in prison. And do you know what Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* says about the Gulag? It says that the protagonist felt freer in the Gulag than in Soviet society, because there he was a prisoner, but could at least say and think what he wanted.

**Henke:** At what point in your life did you long for freedom the most?

**Veisaitė:** During the Nazi era and the second occupation, the Soviet occupation.

**Henke:** What maintains your freedom and how do you maintain it?

**Veisaitė:** My values.

**Henke:** Was there a moment in your life when you took freedom for granted?

**Veisaitė:** Freedom, this is one of the greatest values. Perhaps you understand it best when you are in captivity.

**Henke:** Do you think freedom can only be understood when it is absent?

**Veisaitė:** Being in captivity helps one understand the value of freedom. Perhaps when you lose something you can appreciate it more.

**Henke:** Is the lack of borders synonymous with freedom for you?

**Veisaitė:** I would not say that it is synonymous, but it is one of the most important benefits of freedom. That needs to be appreciated.

**Henke:** Where do you go to think?

**Veisaitė:** I think everywhere.

**Henke:** Did you have to actively learn how to free your mind?

**Veisaitė:** I did not have that freedom during the Soviet years. I could not speak about my own values in public. My mind was always free. But one could not be completely outspoken in the Soviet times in order not to be sent to the Gulag.

**Henke:** Were you optimistic or pessimistic about your future when you were 20 years-old?

**Veisaitė:** I always tried hard and I was optimistic and active. I filled out a survey at school: It says that like the little Faust I wanted to know '*was die Welt zusammenhält*' ('what holds the world together'). I always wanted to know the truth. I wanted to understand. I wanted to act. It was probably part of my personality.

**Henke:** What did your parents expect from you?

**Veisaitė:** I do not know. I lost my parents very early. I was 13 years-old when my mother was killed [by the Nazis]. She hoped that I would be a good person, that I would achieve something in life.

**Henke:** Has something that you previously thought impossible ever happened?

**Veisaitė:** Yes, the fact that we are free and independent. That Lithuania is free and independent.

**Henke:** And was there something you did not really think would happen but that nonetheless happened?

**Veisaitė:** Our freedom. Sajūdis [the Reform Movement of Lithuania] and our liberation.

**Henke:** What hopes did you have for your country and society?

**Veisaitė:** I wanted it to be democratic, good and honest. I am very concerned about the fact we have thieves, that we have too many conformists, too many people influenced by Soviet political thinking. All the polemical arguments about Noreika and Skirpa<sup>6</sup> reveal our slow stage of development. But we also have positive and serious changes.

**Henke:** What were your expectations from Europe when you were young? What did you expect from Europe?

**Veisaitė:** We really lacked engagement with European culture. Russian culture is also very valuable, but not the Soviet kind. I was attracted by the dissident movement in the Soviet Union.

**Henke:** You have talked a little bit about conflicts in Europe already. Do you think these are European conflicts or national conflicts?

**Veisaitė:** Many of them are national conflicts.

**Henke:** What's the bigger threat within the European Union: internal dynamics or external dynamics?

**Veisaitė:** It is hard for me to say. We need politicians to answer this question. European culture is now at a great risk. We are very small compared to the rest of the world, looking at Asia, China, India, Africa. I really do not know. This is where politicians have to be creative.

**Henke:** What makes you proud of Europe?

**Veisaitė:** Our culture. Which is based on Christian values. We live in a Judeo-Christian world. They represent Europe and it is very dear to me. I am part of that culture.

**Henke:** Do you see Europe as a source of peace?

**Veisaitė:** We lived in peace for 70 years after the war. I was very disappointed by Yugoslavia when the massacres started there. I thought that after the Holocaust such things would never happen again, and yet they did happen there, and I realized that things were bad. But you can only counter this with European, Judeo-Christian values

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/holocaust-haunts-lithuania-as-names-are-erased-from-capitals-map/a-50020424>

– love those close to you, love your neighbour, learn to forgive, learn to understand and respect others, do not think that you alone are right in the world, that only your truth exists to the exclusion of all others.

**Henke:** Do you think Europe has learned its lesson from the colonial times?

**Veisaitė:** It probably did. Those are questions for politicians, not me. I think it did learn, but not completely.

**Henke:** I would like to briefly talk about religion. What role does religion play in your life?

**Veisaitė:** It plays a very important role. I mean, I am an agnostic, but also, when I think about this, I am a Christian, a person belonging to Judeo-Christian civilization. I respect other beliefs as well, but not those that call for suicide. I find religion very interesting and I know too little about Buddhism, about the various Zen-based religions out there. But I live in the Judeo-Christian world and I live by its values. I do not know whether God exists. We are not destined to know that, but we should live by these values.

**Henke:** Do you think that Europe has Jewish and Christian roots?

**Veisaitė:** I do not think, I *know* that Christianity has dominated in Europe for over 2,000 years, but I think that not many Christians are true Christians because horrible things have happened throughout history. Catholics killed Protestants, and vice versa, religious battles occurred and the Eastern Orthodox Church broke away. Or when the Crusaders went to baptize people by shedding blood, etc. But since John Paul II's time, Christianity has changed and become really Christian. But not all members of the Church follow him. Some of them still live with hatred and intolerance. And this is well-illustrated by their relationship with Pope Francis, who is indeed a very bright person.

**Henke:** How do you think migration is changing the religious reality in Europe?

**Veisaitė:** This is a very difficult question. Lithuanians themselves were migrants and were admitted as migrants, but this is a big, complicated problem. I will accept any migrant. I will help them. There is not much I can do now, but emotionally, I really support them. There are great people among them. They are running from war, from death, from bigotry. But I have problems with those militant Muslims. I cannot tolerate them.

**Henke:** We come to the last topic - Europe in 50 years. What are your expectations or hopes for future generations in Europe?

**Veisaitė:** I want them to live in tolerance, love and peace, to exhibit respect for themselves and others.

**Henke:** How do you see your own country Lithuania and Vilnius?



**Veisaitė:** Vilnius is my beloved city. I believe it will continue to prosper. It is emerging as a multi-ethnic city, and it will probably remain so. There are no longer any Jews anymore, but there are Poles, there are Belarusians, there are Russians. In our world, sometimes the past plays a greater role than the present. We are ready to die for history but not for the present. I think we are in great danger, but I hope that common sense and love for one's neighbour, compassion and understanding will prevail.

**Henke:** What are the mistakes of the past that you fear will happen again?

**Veisaitė:** The Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda. Many people were killed. And this hatred— it could arise again. Maybe they will start killing migrants. I was afraid that this hateful spirit may come again. And then there is the scope of our values. Now everyone just craves for and talks about money. Education is also largely about economics, about utility, about material concepts – not values. Look, did you choose your nationality? You did not, it was given to you. It is not through your merit that you were born in this or that family. You love your mother and father the most. But you do not think that they are the best, that there are no better women than your mother or no one more important than your father, but you love them. In the same way, I love my homeland, but I do not think we are better than everyone else.

**Henke:** How do you think your field, i.e. theatre, culture, German studies, will change in the future?

**Veisaitė:** I do not know that. There will be new forms and discoveries. There will be new ways to look at things. Everyone draws from their own experience. But I am not a futurologist.

**Henke:** And what would you wish?

**Veisaitė:** I would wish for culture to prosper. I hope that we will not think only about the material world, but rather, that we, in a broader sense, think about survival. Because now there is climate change and all these other things which are very dangerous.

**Henke:** In your opinion, will Europe have its own identity in the future or will we remain Lithuanians, Germans, French?

**Veisaitė:** We will remain what we are and also change. After all, if I do not betray myself, no one will betray me. If, for example, Lithuanians learn Lithuanian but at the same time learn English, they will only be enriched. The greatest danger lies in nationalism, in hatred, in thinking that you are the only one who is right. You know, there is a Jewish parable – where God took all the worries from all the dead spirits, put those worries in separate bags and hung them on a string. And some bags were big, others were middle-sized, others were huge. And then God told all the spirits to go to their own bag. And all of them went to the biggest bag because they thought their suffering was the greatest. You cannot compare suffering. That is immoral.

**Henke:** Do you think the rest of the world will change more than Europe?

**Veisaitė:** They are changing in front of our eyes. China is also changing. It has gained a lot of power. There are also great dangers coming out of Russia. I do not know, you keep asking me about futurology – that is not my field. But, of course, there are all kinds of fears.

**Henke:** How is the new generation changing Europe?

**Veisaitė:** I strongly believe in the new generation. I can especially relate to the Lithuanian youth. They are very interesting people in the majority of cases. They are in pursuit of true values, have cast off nationalism and many superstitions. And they really want to establish themselves. Not in the categories of the past, but in what they see to be actually happening. I strongly believe in and admire the youth. And I talk with them. Thus, my words are grounded not only in hope but in experience, Because I meet young people. They come to me and we discuss.

**Henke:** What do your grandchildren do? Where are they?

**Veisaitė:** They are in England, my grandchildren. I am very glad for them. One of them is a teacher, another one is an architect.

**Henke:** Thinking about my own life now, one interesting experience is that we have problems with our identity in Germany and its history but in Lithuania it seems that people are really proud to be Lithuanians. My mother, after having left Lithuania, used to bring me to Lithuanian communities from an early age. We learned Lithuanian songs and dances there, so I have a very patriotic image of Lithuania.

**Veisaitė:** That is good, as long as there is no hatred for others. You love your mother, but you do not think that she is the best woman in the world. She is the best one for you, the dearest one. You have no other. And that is how it should be. And to me, my mother is the dearest. But I know that there are other great women. That has to be separated. You were born into a German- Lithuanian family. That was granted to you. It is neither your fault nor your achievement. But what will you do with your life? It seems to me that you are already rich in having those two identities and cannot be a narrow-minded fanatic. And to me, Germans are an example of how one should deal with a difficult past. Under the Nazis, six million Jews were killed. In Lithuania there are 227 grave pits where the remains of completely innocent people are lying. Only because they were Jewish. One has to understand this so that it will never happen again. One has to admit that this was horrible. And the Germans did admit it. I now support myself by receiving a German '*Rente*' (pension). And people come to help me because I can no longer do everything myself. They come because Germans provide the money to help those who have suffered from the Nazis. So they are trying. They cannot give me back my mother, but they are doing everything they can. And for this, I deeply respect them. And I really like it in Germany. I have many friends in Germany and I get along well with them. I love them and I love the German culture. And I do not

in any way equate it with Nazism. That was anti-culture, that was horrible. But they admitted to everything, and that did not make them any less of a people. On the contrary, they are respected. If you refuse to admit to anything, that is laughable. What does it mean if you throw people into a pit? You are guilty because you had a choice. Nobody forced you to shoot. We also have to admit what happened in Lithuania. That does not humiliate us or diminish us – on the contrary. I recently read an introduction written by Segejewski – a famous Polish writer and poet – to a historical book which describes very openly and directly the pogrom that took place in Lviv [Eastern Poland/Ukraine] in 1918, where many Jews were killed. Segejewski says that the only way to do away with that past is to tell the truth. And all the while, we are still beating about the bush, and all the time it seems to us that we are humiliating ourselves. If you know a little bit about Shakespeare, think about Macbeth – he stained himself with blood. There was a revolt against him and he was punished. He is not a hero, but a tragic figure. He understood it. But one cannot make a hero out of him.

**Henke:** Since I work in that field, I am very curious to ask you about contemporary art and theatre. What do you think about it?

**Veisaitė:** It seems to me that contemporary art is partially a reflection of the current state of destruction in the world, and thus it is not my kind of art. There are things I cannot understand anymore, although I understand its essence, its energy and its beauty. And I understand what is going on in the artists' hearts. An artist can no longer make pure music like Bach or Mozart did, but there are people like Arvo Pärt – if you know this Estonian composer - who is very famous. He is a person with a strong faith. He creates incredibly pure sacred, modern music. That is very impressive. It depends on what you have inside you.

**Henke:** Great. Thank you very much for the interview.